

**“Sparta in Greek political thought: Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Plutarch”**  
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## INTRODUCTION

In his account of the Persian Wars, the 5<sup>th</sup> century historian Herodotus reports an exchange between the Persian monarch Xerxes and a deposed Spartan king, Demaratus, who became what Lattimore later classified as a “tragic warner” to Xerxes. On the eve of the battle of Thermopylae, Xerxes asks how a small number of free Spartiates can stand up against the massive ranks of soldiers that Xerxes has assembled. Herodotus has Demaratus reply:

So is it with the Lacedaemonians; fighting singly they are as brave as any man living, and together they are the best warriors on earth. Free they are, yet not wholly free; for law is their master (ἐλεύθεροι γὰρ ἔόντες οὐ πάντα ἐλεύθεροι εἰσὶ· ἔπεισι γὰρ σφι δεσπότης νόμος), whom they fear much more than your men fear you. This is my proof—what their law bids them, that they do; and its bidding is ever the same, that they must never flee from the battle before whatsoever odds, but abide at their post and there conquer or die. (Hdt. 7.104)

As the outcome of Thermopylae makes clear, Demaratus is hardly guilty of boasting. But Greek political theorists were not only fascinated by the Spartans who fought at the battle of Thermopylae in 480; they also wondered how slightly more than a century later Sparta was ignobly defeated by Thebes at the battle of Leuctra in 371, after which Spartan hegemony collapsed. How did Sparta field citizen-soldiers in the 5<sup>th</sup> century who were without parallel in their bravery and military prowess? And why did Sparta, predominantly under the same political organization, collapse just over a century later? Such are the main questions that Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch—what Cartledge (1999, 313–14) has characterized as “political-theoretical” laconophiles—seek to answer in their writings about Sparta.

Before exploring how our political theorists make sense of Sparta, let me first provide a bit of historical context for their discussion of Sparta. The polis of Sparta emerged from the combination of five villages in the Eurotas valley during the Archaic period (c. 750); nonetheless, the remoteness of the villages impeded their consolidation and Sparta famously lacked any surrounding walls or fortifications until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Although inter-polis warfare was a common-place during the period, Sparta was unusual in that at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it successfully fought wars of subjugation and conquest against its western neighbor Messenia and its southern neighbor Laconia, wars which doubled the territory of Sparta and produced a subject or quasi-slave population of helots. Herodotus is our first literary source that reports the rise of a legendary lawgiver named Lycurgus in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, although as Plutarch reports “generally speaking it is impossible to make any undisputed statement about Lycurgus the lawgiver.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the political theorists whom I examine in this chapter on the whole accept that such an historical individual existed and single-handedly provided Sparta laws that established almost all of its political and social institutions, governing everything from the mating of citizen couples to the configuration of its political offices and military forces. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century (if not earlier), Sparta was the undisputed hegemon and most powerful polis in Greece; by the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Sparta suffered military defeat and invasion, its citizen population had declined by over half, and its helots were freed from servitude.

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<sup>1</sup> Standard general histories of Sparta include Cartledge (2002) and Kennell (2010); Rahe (2016, 64–123) views that history through the lens of Spartan military policy; Cartledge (1987) is the standard history for Sparta of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (namely, the period in which Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle are writing). All dates are Before the Common Era (BCE) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> See Hdt. 1.65–66, *Vit. Lyc.* 1.1; cf. Thuc. 1.18–19. See further Ephraim (2020).

**Xenophon (431–355 BCE)<sup>3</sup>**

In his *Memorabilia*, a depiction of the conversations and speeches of Socrates, Xenophon reports a dialogue between Socrates and Hippias of Elis (a 5<sup>th</sup> century itinerant teacher and contemporary of Socrates) on the nature of what is just (τὸ δίκαιον) in order to illustrate Socrates' obedience to the laws. After Socrates and Hippias agree that justice is the lawful (τὸ νόμιμον [*Mem.* 4.4.12]),<sup>4</sup> Socrates reports that

Lycurgus the Spartan—have you realized that he would not have made Sparta differ from other cities in any respect had he not established obedience to the laws (τὸ πείθεσθαι τοῖς νόμοις) most securely there? Among rulers in cities, aren't you aware that those who do most to make the citizens obey the laws are the best, and that the city in which the citizens are most obedient to the laws has the best time in peace and is irresistible in war? (*Mem.* 4.4.15)<sup>5</sup>

Xenophon is first and foremost an Athenian student of Socrates and indeed the historian Diogenes Laertius (2.6.48) identifies him as the first of Socrates' followers to write down his words. But although Socrates reportedly departed from Athens only when he was fighting in campaign on behalf of his city, Xenophon spent much of his life outside Athens—as a mercenary,

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<sup>3</sup> For recent discussion of Xenophon's views of Sparta, see Proietti (1987), Gray (2000), Ducat (2014), Christesen (2016), Bartlett (2018), Collins (2018), Humble (2018), Humble (2022), and Schofield (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Xenophon also has Cyrus in the *Cyropaedia* define Persian justice as “the lawful” (*Cyr.* 1.3.17).

<sup>5</sup> All quotations in my chapter derive from the Loeb Classical Library editions with occasional emendation. I abbreviate titles as per the *Oxford Classical Dictionary: Xenophon, Constitution of the Spartans (Lac.), Agesilaus (Ages.), Memorabilia (Mem.), Hellenica (Hell.), and Cyropaedia (Cyr.); Plato, Hippias Major (Hp. mai.), Republic (Resp.), Laws (Leg.), Laches (Lach.), Menexenus (Menex.), and Protagoras (Prt.); Aristotle, Politics (Pol.), Nicomachean Ethics (EN), and Art of Rhetoric (Rhet.); and Plutarch, Lycurgus (Vit. Lyc.), Lysander (Vit. Lys.), Agesilaus (Vit. Ages.), and Ancient Customs of Sparta (Inst. Lac.).*

fighting first on behalf of the Persian usurper Cyrus the Younger (in 401, which Xenophon depicts in his *Anabasis*), and then secondly on behalf of the Spartan king Agesilaus (whom Xenophon depicts in both his history of the 4<sup>th</sup> CENTURY, the *Hellenica*, and in the encomium named after him). Indeed, Xenophon suggests that he himself was a member of the Spartan army that faced off against a Theban army at the battle of Coronea (394), a Theban army that included Athenian allies.<sup>6</sup> Following his service to king Agesilaus, Xenophon was banished from Athens, settled in Laconia and had his sons educated in the Spartan educational system.<sup>7</sup>

Xenophon's surviving written works defy easy characterization by genre, but Sparta appears prominently in many of them.<sup>8</sup> First and foremost is his *Constitution of the Lacedemonians*, which I will examine at length below and which documents the social and political reforms of the legendary Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus during the Archaic period. As noted above, Xenophon's *Hellenica* and *Anabasis* are quasi-historical depictions of 4<sup>th</sup> century Greece and Persia in which Spartans feature prominently—both as individual mercenaries, such as Clearchus, one of the Spartan commanders in the *Anabasis*, and as leaders of Spartan armies in battle at the end of the Peloponnesian Wars and during the period of Spartan hegemony (404–371). Finally, Xenophon authored an “encomium” or speech in praise of the Spartan king Agesilaus, under whom he fought and who served as his patron when he resided in Laconia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See *Hell.* 3.1.2, and *Ages.* 2.11.

<sup>7</sup> See Diog. Laert. 2.6.51, 54, *Vit. Ages.* 20.2. Hobden (2020, 1–13) is an overview of Xenophon's life and works; Gray (2000) is an overview of his political theory.

<sup>8</sup> For the range of Xenophon texts that examine Sparta, see Christesen (2016) and Rocchi (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Sparta also appears, albeit obliquely, in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, perhaps especially in the educational system that Xenophon attributes to Persia (*Cyr.* 1.2.2–14). See further Tuplin (1994) and Azoulay (2007).

Xenophon’s use of numerous literary genres—Socratic dialogues, historical narrative, biography, constitutions, and even treatises on horsemanship and hunting dogs—raises a number of interpretive questions and challenges. Given my subject, the most important challenge is Xenophon’s perceived “Laconizing” or pro-Spartan sympathies which one might claim undermine his importance as a critical or objective observer of Spartan institutions. For instance, his encomium of Agesilaus begins with the claim that

I know that it is not easy to write a praise (ἔπαινον) of Agesilaus that shall be worth of his virtue and glory, but nonetheless it must be attempted. For it would not be seemly if, because a man was perfectly good (ὅτι τελέως ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς ἐγένετο), he should not, for that very reason, attain even lesser praises. (*Ages.* 1.1)

The claim that a Spartan king is “perfectly good” is rather strong. Numerous scholars note that one can find ample counter-evidence of such an estimation of Agesilaus’ character in Xenophon’s own *Hellenica*.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Xenophon does appear to be experimenting with a specific genre of writing, namely an encomium speech, which is a specific form of epideictic rhetoric that aims to praise a figure.<sup>11</sup> That Xenophon follows the conventions of an emergent genre hardly undermines his objectivity.<sup>12</sup> When I examine Xenophon’s apparent criticisms of the *Constitution*

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<sup>10</sup> See Tuplin (1993), Powell (2020), and Humble (2022, 221–236). Compare, for instance, *Ages.* 2.2 with *Hell.* 4.3.4; *Ages.* 2.20 with *Hell.* 4.6.4–12; and *Ages.* 3.4 with *Hell.* 4.1.3. Plutarch also supplies ample evidence to call into question the claim that Agesilaus possessed perfect goodness (see *Vit. Ages.* 10.6, 22.1–2, 26.1–5, 35.3, 36.1).

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle outlines the components of epideictic rhetoric in *Rhet.* 1.9 and Xenophon’s chapters on Agesilaus’ virtues (*Ages.* 3–9) seem to follow closely Aristotle’s account (*Rhet.* 1.9.1366a32–b8). See further Humble (2020).

<sup>12</sup> That Xenophon uses the genre of encomia hardly entails the conclusion of Strauss (1939) that Xenophon intends his praise of Agesilaus (much less Sparta as a whole) to be merely ironic. Nonetheless, I think it is significant that although Plato and Aristotle articulate theoretical criticisms of the Spartan constitution, Xenophon offers no such analysis. Even if Xenophon’s

of the *Lacedemonians* (*Lac.* 14) I will return to this issue. But at least initially, it appears charitable to understand some of Xenophon’s claims about Sparta in light of from his use of different literary genres—some of which he helped to craft as forms of prose writing.

Xenophon identifies the goal of his *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* as follows:

But I, reflecting once that Sparta, though being one of the most thinly populated poleis, emerged as both the most powerful and the most renowned in Greece, wondered at how ever this had come about; but when I had observed closely the practices of the Spartiates, I wondered no longer. (*Lac.* 1.1)<sup>13</sup>

Xenophon subdivides his analysis—which he explicitly notes is based on his own

**Table 1: Structure of Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedemonians***

| Chapters  | Main subject                 | Sub-topics  |
|-----------|------------------------------|---|
| 1.1–2     | Purpose of the investigation | 1.1: Paradox of Spartan power<br>1.2: Lycurgus’ goal—link happiness to obedience to the laws  |
| 1.3–4.7   | Education (παιδεία)          | 1.3–10: concerning child production (τεκνοποιία)<br>2.1–14: education of youths (age 7–17) <sup>14</sup><br>3.1–5: education of teens (age 17–19)<br>4.1–7: education of <i>hebontes</i> (age 20–29)  |
| 5.1–10.8  | Daily life practices         | 5.1–9: Common messes and exercise<br>6.1–5: Communal rule over children, slaves, and animals<br>7.1–6: Prohibitions on commercial activity and possession of gold<br>8.1–5: Office of the Ephors<br>9.1–6: Spartan goodness and virtue (courage)<br>10.1–8: Office of Elders and virtue in old age; political virtue and civic equality |
| 11.1–15.9 | Kingship and structure of    | 11.1–10: Kit and organization of Spartan army<br>12.1–7: Encampment practices of Spartan army<br>13.1–11: Office of kingship while on military campaign   |

praise of Agesilaus were ironic, it would only follow that Agesilaus is not in fact “perfectly good”; such a claim offers no theoretical or systemic critique of the Spartan constitution or the virtues that it produces. See further Christesen (2016) and Humble (2022, 61–68).

<sup>13</sup> Throughout this section I quote from the Greek text and translation of the *Lac.* in Humble (2022, 294–331), with minor emendation.

<sup>14</sup> Xenophon does not reproduce the Spartan age cohorts, but see further *Vit. Lyc.* 16.4–7, 17.2–5 with Kennell (1995) and Ducat (2006).

|  |                 |  |
|--|-----------------|--|
|  | Spartan<br>army | 14.1–7: 4 <sup>th</sup> century disobedience to Lycurgan laws<br>15.1–9: Office of kingship while not on military campaign |
|--|-----------------|--|

observations— into three parts, the details of which are most easily conveyed in tabular form (see Table 1). Two prominent themes emerge from the details of Xenophon’s observations. First, the Lycurgan reforms are fundamentally directed towards inculcating obedience (πειθῶ) and shame or respect (αἰδῶ). Indeed, Xenophon claims that Lycurgus made Sparta preeminent in happiness as a function of its obedience to his laws (*Lac.* 1.2). But such obedience is also a function of physical punishment exercised not only by the “paidonomos” (the public office of education supervision) but by any adult Spartiate.<sup>15</sup> The office of the Ephors (literally “overseers”) exercise power that one might believe would terrify citizens into obedience and Xenophon likens them to tyrants who can exercise punishment on the spot (*Lac.* 6.3–4). Xenophon reports that before handing down his laws, Lycurgus sought their approval by the oracle at Delphi, so that “it was not only illegal (ἄνομον) but also impious (ἀνόσιον) not to obey laws delivered by the Pythian god” (*Lac.* 8.5). It is understandable that Plutarch, writing centuries later, can perceive a criticism that Spartan’s know only how to obey, not how to command (*Vit. Lyc.* 30.3–6).

Secondly, in Xenophon’s description the Lycurgan reforms interpret human goodness rather narrowly as self-mastery with respect to pain and pleasure and martial courage. For instance, Spartan pederasty is directed towards a love of beautiful souls rather than bodies, public messes are designed to prohibit gluttony or drunkenness through social pressure, and prohibitions against commercial activities are designed to thwart desire for money.<sup>16</sup> Xenophon’s

<sup>15</sup> See *Lac.* 2.2, 2.10–11, 6.1–2.

<sup>16</sup> See *Lac.* 2.13, 3.2; 5.4–6; 7.3, 7.6

extended description of virtue and human goodness makes clear both the narrowness of the Spartan interpretation of virtue and the extraordinary social pressure that inculcates it. After noting that Spartans would choose a good death instead of a shameful life (τὸν καλὸν θάνατον ἀντὶ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ βίου), he writes that

To speak the truth, safety actually more of the time follows valour (ἔπεται τῇ ἀρετῇ) rather than cowardice (τῇ κακίᾳ); for indeed valour is both easier, more pleasant, more resourceful and stronger. And it is clear that glory (εὐκλεία) also, above all, follows valour (ἔπεται τῇ ἀρετῇ); indeed, all men want somehow to fight alongside brave men (τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς). Again, by what means [Lycurgus] contrived for this to happen, it is also good not to pass over. Well, he clearly procured happiness for the brave but unhappiness for cowards (παρεσκεύασε τοῖς μὲν ἀγαθοῖς εὐδαιμονίαν, τοῖς δὲ κακοῖς κακοδαιμονίαν). For in the other poleis when someone is a coward (κακός), he only gets the reputation of being a coward, but the coward goes to the same market as the brave man (τάγαθῶ) and sits beside him and exercises with him, if he so wishes. In Lacedaemon, however, everyone would be ashamed to take a coward (τὸν κακόν) as a messmate, and everyone likewise to have him as a training partner in wrestling. And often, such a man, even when sides are being determined for a ball game, is left without a place, and in choruses he is driven away to the disgraceful positions. And in fact, in the streets he must step out of the way, and at seated occasions he must give up his seat even to younger men. (*Lac.* 9.2–5)

Although Xenophon uses general Greek terms for virtue and vice (e.g., ἀρετή/κακία) and a good and bad man (e.g., ἀγαθός/κακός), Humble (2022, 315 n. 39, 40) is quite right to render the former terms as valour/cowardice and the latter terms as a brave man/a coward. Context makes clear that virtue and goodness, within the framework of Xenophon's depiction of the Lycurgan reforms, are cashed out primarily in terms of martial bravery.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Schofield (2021) argues that authors like Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle debated whether as an historical point the notion of goodness aimed at in Sparta was in fact narrowly militaristic (like Cleinas describes the Cretan constitution in the *Laws*) or actually much broader (a view that we will see that Plutarch endorses). Schofield argues that we should place Xenophon and Plato in the former camp (what he calls "View A") while Aristotle clearly falls into the later camp ("View



Xenophon concludes the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* by noting that contemporary (i.e., 4<sup>th</sup> century) Spartans are “manifestly obeying neither the god nor the laws of Lycurgus” (*Lac.* 14.7). More specifically, according to Xenophon his contemporary Spartans have abandoned modest living in Laconia for positions as harmosts or military governors of other territories and have relinquished a fear of owning gold and now pride themselves on its possession time (*Lac.* 14.2–3). Humble (2022) takes this passage and others to indicate that although Xenophon appears to offer uncritical Laconizing praise of Sparta, in fact the *Constitution* is a subtle critique of the Lycurgan reforms. She writes that “Xenophon has, in effect, shown how the Spartan system contained the seeds of its own destruction” (197). But as Aristotle implies in his own analysis of Sparta in *Politics* 2.9, theorists face two options when confronted with Sparta’s collapse in the 4<sup>th</sup> century: either the Lycurgan reforms are intrinsically flawed (in which case the problem lies with the laws themselves) or Spartans have failed to follow the Lycurgan reforms (in which case the problems lies with a failure on the part of 4<sup>th</sup> century Spartans). A straight-forward reading of *Lac.* 14 suggests that Xenophon opted for the latter choice. It seems telling in this regard that Xenophon, unlike Plato and Aristotle, never explicitly offers a theoretical explanation or critique of the Lycurgan reforms. Rather, Xenophon seems to hold a position similar to that of Plutarch, which identifies the problem of Sparta in terms of its departures from the Lycurgan reforms.

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B”). But I find Schofield’s claim hard to reconcile with passages like *Lac.* 9.2–5, where the term for virtue seems a synonym for courage. It also seems striking that the *Constitution of the Spartans* says almost nothing about intellectual virtue (unlike Plutarch’s account of the Spartan constitution in *Vit. Lyc.*).

**Plato (428–348 BCE)<sup>18</sup>**

Plato presents the full panoply of Sparta—both its strengths and its weaknesses—in several different works. For instance, numerous Platonic dialogues invoke Sparta as an example of “good government” (εὐνομία/εὐνομεῖσθαι) that produces law-abiding virtuous citizens (although that trope, as we will see in his dialogue the *Hippias Major*, can be both playful and serious). Plato’s *Republic* is especially interested in what Schofield (2006) calls the “politeia tradition,” namely the notion that “the whole nature of society and the development of the individual alike could be transformed in tune with each other if the city itself made sure that it had not just an educational system, but an entire cultural environment designed with the single-minded aim of fostering virtue and the desire to become ‘a perfect citizen’” (37). Nonetheless, Plato’s final dialogue, the *Laws*, commences with a thorough criticism of Spartan (and Cretan) militarism. Sparta may be an excellent example of a *politeia* understood as a comprehensive educational and political social-system, nonetheless the orientation of that comprehensive social-system is fundamentally misdirected.

Plato’s *Crito*, a dialogue that depicts Socrates’ obedience to the laws of Athens even when they unjustly condemn him to death, reports that Socrates never decamped to Sparta or Crete, even though he repeatedly described them as “well-governed” or “good ordered” (εὐνομεῖσθαι [52e]).<sup>19</sup> That Sparta represents a well-governed society indeed becomes a trope in Plato’s works,

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<sup>18</sup> For recent discussion of Plato’s views of Sparta, see Lévy (2005), Schofield (2006), Fütter (2012), Lane (2013), Meyer (2015), Herrmann (2018), Humble (2018), Friedland (2020), and Schofield (2021).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.4.15, which I discuss above in Part I of my chapter.

both for serious and humorous purposes.<sup>20</sup> A good example of the former can be found in Plato's *Hippias Major*, a dialogue that comedically depicts the itinerate teacher (or "sophist") Hippias of Elis, a younger 5<sup>th</sup> CENTURY contemporary of Socrates.<sup>21</sup> Within the dialogue, the character of Hippias depicts himself as a polymath able to master any subject, to make men better with respect to virtue, and to earn twice as much as any other sophist. Socrates asks him "which of the cities that you go to did you make the most money? Or are we to take it that it was at Lacedaemon, where your visits have been most frequent?" (*Hp. mai.* 283b). Hippias is forced to acknowledge that although Sparta is wealthy and cares about the education of its young, they are unwilling to compensate Hippias for his teachings. Socrates helps Hippias draw the conclusion of his humiliation:

Socrates: Then were you not able to persuade the young men at Lacedaemon that they would make more progress towards virtue by associating with you than with their own people, or were you powerless to persuade their fathers that they ought rather to hand them over to you than to care for them themselves, if they are at all concerned for their sons? For surely they did not begrudge it to their children to become as good as possible.

Hippias: I do not think they begrudged it.

Socrates: But certainly Lacedaemon is well governed (εὐνομός).

Hippias: Of course it is.

Socrates: And in well-governed states virtue is most highly honoured (Ἐν δὲ γε ταῖς εὐνόμοις πόλεσι τιμιώτατον ἡ ἀρετή).

Hippias: Certainly.

Socrates: And you know best of all men how to transmit that to another.

Hippias: Much best, Socrates. (*Hp. mai.* 283e2–284a5)

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<sup>20</sup> For serious invocations of Spartan "good government" see *Tim.* 23c–d, 25 b–c; *Critias* 110c–112d. For humorous invocations, see *Prt.* 342a–3. See further Schofield (2006, 38–39).

<sup>21</sup> As Trivigno (2016) accurately notes, within the framework of the dialogue "Hippias is a fool" (31).

Although *Hippias Major* is primarily concerned with a critique of the pedagogical content and methods of one 5<sup>th</sup> CENTURY sophist, the critique presupposes that to be well-governed is nothing other than to be concerned with training in virtue. Throughout the dialogues, Plato often uses Sparta to stand in place as an example of virtue and its education, especially martial virtue.<sup>22</sup>

Although the *Republic* contains many themes indeed, perhaps most prominent is the notion that education is a form of a comprehensive social-system that crafts the souls of its citizens. As Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* made clear, Sparta developed precisely such a *politeia* system and Plato's *Republic* prescribes just such a system in its account of the conditions under which the guardians or rulers of the best constitution will live. Although Socrates in the *Republic* fails to refer to the system as Spartan, it seems quite clear that he has the Spartan model of education (if not its educational content) in mind. Here are some of the educational systems key provisions that Socrates describes:

“Consider if they should live and reside in some such way as follows,” I said, “if they are going to be men of this sort: first of all none of them is to have acquired any personal property which is not absolutely necessary. Then none must have any dwelling or storehouse of any sort to which there is not free access to anyone who wishes to enter. They will have such supplies as men need who are fit to fight, sound of mind and courageous, covenanting from the rest of the citizens to receive so much pay for their duties as guardians that they will not have a surplus nor a shortfall at the end of the year. They will eat regularly in a mess and live together like troops in camp. We shall tell them that they have divine gold and silver from the gods for ever in their souls, and that they have no need of human gold and silver in addition.” (*Resp.* 3.416d5–e8)

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<sup>22</sup> Plato often juxtaposes Athens and Sparta with respect to virtue. See, for instance, *Alc* 120b–124a; 2 *Alc* 148b–149b; *Leg.* 1.641e; *Lach.* 183a–c; *Tht* 162c, 169b. The *Menexenus* documents the relationship between Athens and Sparta in the 5<sup>th</sup> C., both as allies and as foes; see *Menex.* 240c, 241c, 242a–c, 244cd, 245b, 246a; see also *Leg.* 3.686b, 3.698e. The Spartan character in the *Laws*, Megillus, reports that his family holds an honorary consulate in Athens and expresses fondness for the Athenian accent and way of life (1.642b–d)

Although the Spartan system goes beyond merely communal living and mess-halls, such a system—including prohibitions on the ownership of property—is designed to inculcate loyalty and obedience to the political community instead of to family or specific individuals.

Within the *Republic*, Socrates identifies Sparta and Crete as examples of timarchy, namely the constitution in which the auxiliary class rules rather than the philosopher kings.<sup>23</sup> Such honor-loving rulers “neglected the true Muse, the companion of discussion and philosophy, and honored physical training more than musical training.”<sup>24</sup> But Plato’s most extensive critique of Sparta is found in the first book of the *Laws*, in which the Athenian Stranger calls into question the militaristic focus on inter-polis warfare that he thinks determines the whole focus of the Spartan politeia. Plato first describes such a focus in the mouth of the Cretan character, Cleinias. The Cretan lawgiver Minos, whom the Spartans followed, thought that

what the greater part of mankind calls peace is merely a name; the reality is that for cities the natural state of affairs is an undeclared war of all against all (τῶ δ’ ἔργῳ πάσαις πρὸς πάσας τὰς πόλεις ἀεὶ πόλεμον ἀκήρυκτον κατὰ φύσιν εἶναι). If you take the view of Crete’s lawgiver, what you will find, broadly speaking, is that he framed all our institutions, in the private and public sphere, with an eye to war, and that he bequeathed us our laws to keep safe on the understanding that there is no benefit in anything else—neither in possessions or in activities—unless you are first victorious in war, since all the property of those who are conquered becomes the property of their conquerors. (*Leg.* 1.626a2–b3, Griffin trans.)

Cleinias suspects that his Athenian companion agrees with him, to which Megillus retorts “An inspired guess! What other answer could any Spartan possibly give?” (*Leg.* 1.626c3–4).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Resp.* 8.543c, 545ab, 547b; cf. 10.599d. See further Schofield (2006, 101–104, 259).

<sup>24</sup> *Resp.* 8.548b; cf. *Leg.* 2.673b–e.

<sup>25</sup> On this exchange, see further Schofield (2021, 453–54).

The Athenian Stranger's critique of Cretan and Spartan militarism is two-fold. First, he persuades Cleinias that war internal to a political community—namely civil war (στάσις [1.630b5])—is a far more treacherous thing, and its avoidance a more important end, than external conflict between different cities. The lawgiver's focus should be upon how to maintain friendship and peace between citizens within the same city (*Leg.* 1.628a–c). But the more important argument—one which redirects the conversation to the question of how human goodness should orient the lawgiver in general (*Leg.* 1.630c–e)—concerns the nature of the highest good.

The highest good, however, is neither war nor civil strife—which things we should pray rather to be saved from—but peace one with another and friendly feeling (εἰρηνὴ δὲ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἅμα καὶ φιλοφροσύνη). Moreover, it would seem that the victory we mentioned of a State over itself is not one of the best things but one of those which are necessary. For imagine a man supposing that a human body was best off when it was sick and purged with physic, while never giving a thought to the case of the body that needs no physic at all! Similarly, with regard to the well-being of a State or an individual, that man will never make a genuine statesman who pays attention primarily and solely to the needs of foreign warfare, nor will he make a finished lawgiver unless he designs his war legislation for peace rather than his peace legislation for war. (*Leg.* 1.628c8–e2)

Although avoidance of internal strife is important, even a focus on internal strife is myopic. But underlying both civic concord and external harmony with other political communities is the goal of peace. Plato's *Laws* thus stands at the beginning of the just war tradition of viewing peace as the telos or goal of war in opposition to the militarism that Minos and Lycurgus mistakenly embedded within the Cretan and Spartan constitutions.<sup>26</sup> Such a goal appears essential to the Lycurgan reforms rather than a 4<sup>th</sup> century departure from them.

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Aristotle, *Pol.* 7.14.1333a34–36 and Cicero, *Off.* 1.35.

**Aristotle (384–322 BCE)<sup>27</sup>**

Although Aristotle speaks highly of Sparta’s model of public education—which he clearly incorporates into his own program for the best constitution in the last two books of his *Politics*<sup>28</sup>—in general he believes that Sparta’s disastrous collapse in the 4<sup>th</sup> century showed a number of fundamental flaws in Spartan social and political institutions, flaws that he attributes directly to its “legislator” (i.e., Lycurgus) rather than to later disobedience to Lycurgan laws. At one point he notes that some of his contemporaries

praise the Spartan constitution and express admiration for the aim of its legislator, because his entire legislation was intended to promote conquest and war. What they say is easy to refute by argument, and has now been refuted by the facts too....Thibron and all these other writers are no different: they admire the Spartan legislator because by training the Spartans to face danger he enabled them to rule over many. And yet it is clear, now that their empire is no longer in their hands at any rate, the Spartans are not a happy people and that their legislator is not a good one. Moreover, it is absurd if it was by keeping to his laws and putting them into practice within impediment that they lost their fine way of life. (7.14.1333b12–15, 18–26, Reeve trans.)

In general, Aristotle appear to follow the general direction of Plato’s critique in the *Laws*. Whereas Xenophon (and as we will see, Plutarch also) blames the collapse of Sparta on the failure of Spartans to obey Lycurgus’ laws, Aristotle agrees with Plato that Lycurgus’ laws were themselves flawed.

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<sup>27</sup> Parenthetical references in this part of my chapter refer to Aristotle’s *Politics* unless otherwise noted. For recent discussion of Aristotle’s views of Sparta, see Schütrumpf (1994), Lévy (2001), Bertelli (2004), Hitz (2012), Rubin (2012), Becchi (2014), Lockwood (2017), Lockwood (2018), and Schofield (2018).

<sup>28</sup> See *EN* 10.9.1180a25–29; 7.2.1324b5–9, 8.1.1337a30–32. See further Ducat (2006, 119–127).

Although Aristotle has a number of scattered remarks about Sparta in his ethical and political writings, he provides sustained and substantive analysis and of Sparta in three places.<sup>29</sup> *Politics* 2.9 examines Sparta alongside several constitutions purported to be well-governed with respect to Aristotle’s technical notion of *politeia*, namely as the organization of its various offices and structures of political administration.<sup>30</sup> *Politics* 4.9 examines Sparta as a mixed constitution that balances democratic and oligarchic elements. Finally, *Politics* 7–8 examines the Spartan educational system—both its goals and its methods—in conjunction with Aristotle’s articulation of his own “best constitution,” one which in many respects corrects Lycurgan mistakes while nonetheless embracing the Lycurgan project of crafting virtuous citizens (albeit not exclusively courageous citizens) in a comprehensive public social-system.<sup>31</sup>

The second book of the *Politics* is devoted to the examination of constitutions that are reputed to be well-governed—including both theoretical proposals (like that of Plato’s *Republic* or Hippodamus’ urban planning) and existing city-states (specifically, Crete, Sparta, and Carthage).<sup>32</sup> Although Aristotle often provides positive comparative evaluations—for instance, Sparta, Crete, and Carthage all share analogous political offices, but Aristotle judges Carthage as

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle also offers a substantive analysis of Spartan kingship, albeit without critical evaluation (3.14.1285a2–15, 1285b23–24).

<sup>30</sup> See 3.6.1278b8–14, 3.7.1279a25, 4.3.1290a6–10, 4.11.1295a38–41; see further Schofield (2006, 33–34).

<sup>31</sup> Lockwood (2018) argues that Aristotle’s incorporation of the Spartan educational framework and institutions into the program of his own best constitution and his description of the citizens in his best regime suggests that he views his best constitution through “Spartan eyes,” seeking for it an educational model based upon the ideal of the free citizen-soldier.

<sup>32</sup> 2.1.1260b27–35. See Lockwood (2015) for an overview of the details of *Politics* 2 and Lockwood (2017) for the criteria of evaluation that Aristotle uses to evaluate best constitutions.



having the best organization of each office in all three cases<sup>33</sup>—in general Aristotle offers criticisms of Sparta rather than praise. He identifies six areas of critique, the last of which—the underlying principle (ὑπόθεσις) of the constitution—he postpones significant discussion of until *Politics* 7–8.<sup>34</sup> The five other areas of critique are: (1) the system of using helots to supply Spartiates with leisure; (2) neglect of female education; (3) de facto inequality of property (due to female dowries and inheritances) that decreases the number of Spartiates or full citizens; (4) the offices of the Ephors and the Gerousia; and (5) private supply of food for the public messes.

Space does not permit me to unpack all five of Aristotle’s criticisms, but since it is a point of disagreement with Plutarch, let me discuss the second critique, namely the claim that Lycurgus neglected the education of women. Aristotle claims that

the legislator, wishing the whole city-state to have endurance (τὴν πόλιν...καρτερικὴν), makes his wish evident where the men are concerned,<sup>35</sup> but has been negligent in the case of women. For being free from all constraint, they live in total intemperance and luxury. (2.9.1269b19–23)

Such negligence resulted in the licentiousness (ἄνεσις) of Spartan women which undermined male martial virtue in two ways. First, licentiousness inculcates intemperance and luxury in Spartan women, which in turn infects Spartan men with the inculcation of a love of money (πρὸς τὴν φιλοχρηματίαν [1270a14–15]), a habit that wives transmit to their families (both husbands

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle judges the Spartan overseers as superior to the Cretan order keepers, and the Carthaginian 104 as superior to the overseers (2.10.1272a27–35; 2.11.1272b34–36); he makes extended criticisms of the Spartan and Cretan senates, but his criticisms of Carthage’s senate are minor and ultimately he praises it as aristocratic (2.9.1270b36–71a8; 2.10.1272a35–39; 2.11.1273a13–18); and he judges the Carthaginian office of king better than that of the Spartan office (2.11.1272b37–1273a1).

<sup>34</sup> 2.9.1271a41–b9, 7.2.1324b3–15, 7.14.1333b6–33.

<sup>35</sup> 2.9.1271b1–7; cf. *Vit. Lyc.* 22.2 and *Lac.* 14.1–7.

and children).<sup>36</sup> Second, Spartan sexual obsession—as the pairing of Aphrodite and Ares in myth reminds us (2.9.1269b28–29)—empowers Spartan women to dominate their men (γυναικοκρατούμενοι [1269b24–25]). Aristotle notes,

That is why the same happened to the Spartans, and why in the days of their hegemony, many things were managed by women. And yet what difference is there between women rulers and rulers ruled by women? The result is the same. Audacity (θρασύτης) is not useful in everyday matters, but only, if at all, in war. Yet Spartan women were very harmful even here. They showed this quite clearly during the Theban invasions. (2.9.1269b30–36)

Although Spartan free women make up half of their polis' free population, their educational neglect appears to be a major cause of Sparta's decline and a defect more generally in Greek city-states.<sup>37</sup>

Aristotle's discussion of mixed constitutions in *Politics* 4.9 places Sparta's constitution in a much more positive light. A perennial problem within classical Greek city-states is the problem of factionalism and the polarization of cities between the wealthy and the poor (or oligarchies and democracies).<sup>38</sup> Aristotle tacitly acknowledges that the long-term stability of the Spartan constitution is a function of its mixture of oligarchic and democratic elements such that it is possible to describe the constitution as both a democracy and an oligarchy. The Spartan constitution incorporates democratic elements, such as

the way sons are brought up (for those of the rich are brought up like those of the poor, and are educated in the way that the sons of the poor could be). Similarly,

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<sup>36</sup> 2.9.1269b12–24, 1269b39–1270a15; cf. 1271a18.

<sup>37</sup> 2.9.1269b18–19. Aristotle's remarks about Spartan women making up half the polis appear to be an allusion to his insistence on education for women (1.13.1260b19). Aristotle's own remarks about women's education are scattered through *Pol.* 7.16 (including explicit guidelines for co-ed physical education, see 1335b10–11).

<sup>38</sup> See 4.3.1290a13–15, 4.11.1296a20, 5.1.1301b40, 5.4.1304a37.

at the next age, when they have become men, it is the same way (for it is not entirely clear who is rich and who is poor). The food at the communal messes is the same for everyone, and the rich wear clothes that any poor person could also provide for himself. Further, of the two most important offices, the people elect candidates to one and share in the other (for they elect the senators and share in the overseership);

But, Aristotle continues, the Spartan constitution also incorporates oligarchic elements such as

all the officials are elected and none chosen by lot, a few have control to impose death and exile, and there are also many other such elements. In a constitution that is well mixed, by contrast, both elements should seem to be present, and also neither. (4.9.1294b21–31, 32–36)

Here we see Aristotle balancing his extensive criticisms of the Spartan constitution in *Politics* 2.9 with an appreciation of the salutary elements of its overall organization of offices and norms.<sup>39</sup> Aristotle makes a similar point in his discussion of Spartan kingship, which the Spartan king Theopompus weakened (by instituting the Ephors as a check) but which overall strengthen the constitution (5.11.1313a25–33).

Aristotle's account of Spartan education in *Politics* 7–8 claims that their inability to exercise the virtues of leisure make them like an iron sword which, although apparently sharp in battle, loses its edge and becomes useless in times of peace (7.14.1334a8–9). Aristotle's central criticism of Sparta's educational system is that although the polis rigorously trained its soldiers, they were incapable of acting well as citizen off the battlefield. Spartan education at best produces mediocre soldiers; it fails entirely to produce excellent citizen-soldiers. Aristotle's

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<sup>39</sup> Aristotle makes similar claims about how the constitution in Plato's *Laws* balances democratic and oligarchic features (2.6.1266a6–23; cf. *Leg.* 1.293d, 3.701e, 6.756e).

discussion of education in his own best constitution identifies the flawed goal of Spartan education, namely its goal of domination and elevation of courage and endurance as the highest virtues, and several of its means (specifically, musical and gymnastic education).<sup>40</sup> Aristotle agrees with Plato that Spartan education is based upon a fundamentally mistaken notion of happiness or well-being. Since the Spartan notion of happiness is mistaken, so too is the Spartan goal (ἄριστος) of domination and its inculcation of solely martial virtues such as courage and endurance. The Spartans believe that the most choiceworthy life for a city is an active one, and by active they mean exercising dominion or masterly rule over their neighbors (7.2.1324b3–9), presumably a policy of territorial domination like that which Sparta exercised during its period of hegemony following the Peloponnesian Wars from 404 to 371 BCE. Individual happiness for a citizen participating the life of such a city is constituted by the exercise of the martial virtues which make such domination militarily possible. Aristotle has a quiver full of criticisms against the claim that domination is the best way of life for a city: it mistakes statesmanship for mastership, it fails to distinguish just and unjust uses of force, and it mistakes war, rather than peace, as the ultimate goal of a polis.<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, with respect to the Spartan elevation of endurance as the highest virtue, in *Politics* 7.15 Aristotle discusses those virtues which education ought to inculcate and again turns to Sparta as a foil for his own educational program. Since the human end consists in engagement in excellent activities of leisure, Aristotle claims that education should inculcate those virtues

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<sup>40</sup> Although space does not permit me to discuss Aristotle's criticisms of Spartan musical and gymnastic education, see further Lockwood (2018, 103–105).

<sup>41</sup> See 7.2.1324b23–37, 1325a5–10.

useful for leisure—both those activated during leisurely pursuits (διαγωγῆ) and those involved in the work (ἀσχολία) to secure leisure (σχολή). Thus, he writes that

Courage and endurance (καρτερίας) are required for work (ασχολίαν), philosophy for leisure (σχολήν), and moderation for both, but particularly for peace and leisure. For war compels people to be just and moderate, but the enjoyment of good luck and the leisure that accompanies peace tends to make them arrogant. Much justice and moderation are needed, therefore, by those who are held to be doing best (τοὺς ἄριστα δοκοῦντας). (7.14.1334a22–29)

Although Aristotle certainly recognizes a place for the martial virtues of endurance and courage in his own account of education in the best regime, both virtues are oriented towards what he calls ‘necessity’ rather than what is leisurely (7.15.1334a18). Sparta’s elevation of endurance as the highest or perhaps even only virtue leaves its citizens incapacitated to exercise the other virtues of leisure, something Aristotle describes as especially shameful (αἰσχρόν). Spartan men show themselves as good when working and fighting, but slavish when at peace and at leisure (1334a38–39).

### **Plutarch (46–119 CE)<sup>42</sup>**

Whereas Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle all lived during the time of Sparta’s collapse in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Plutarch lived centuries later, long after Sparta had been absorbed into the Roman Empire, along with all the other Greek city-states.<sup>43</sup> Such chronological perspective provides Plutarch access to many literary sources unavailable both to the 4<sup>th</sup> century theorists I

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<sup>42</sup> For recent discussion of Plutarch’s views of Sparta, see De Blois (2004), Hershbell (2004), Futter (2012), Lane (2013), Becchi (2014), and Lucchesi (2014).

<sup>43</sup> See further Roskam (2021, 1–37).

have examined and to contemporary scholars. Indeed, Plutarch indicates that he had first-hand experience of Sparta, including the lashing of Spartan ephebes at the altar of Artemis Orthia.<sup>44</sup> His writings include “lives” or biographies of Spartans such as Lycurgus, Lysander, Agesilaus, Agis, and Cleomenes; attributed to him are also a tractate that records the ancient customs of Sparta and collections of the *Sayings of Spartans* and *Sayings of Spartan Women*. Like Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Spartans*, Plutarch’s life of Lycurgus includes an extended analysis of Spartan social structure, including its educational system and common messes (*Vit. Lyc.* 10–12, 16–18); like Aristotle’s *Politics* 2, the life of Lycurgus also includes extended analysis of Spartan political offices and land redistribution, including the text of Lycurgus’ Great Rhetra (*Vit. Lyc.* 5–13). For the purposes of this chapter, Plutarch is especially valuable because he critiques the analyses of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle on crucial points about Spartan social and political institutions. Let me first discuss the method of Plutarch’s lives; I will then examine his analysis of Spartan society and the causes of its collapse in the 4<sup>th</sup> century; I will conclude the section and chapter with a consideration of Plutarch’s critique of the other authors I have examined.

Plutarch as an author explores several genres, although for the purposes of this chapter the most important are his parallel lives in which he places side by side the “lives” or biographies of two famous individuals (usually one Greek, one Roman). The juxtapositions themselves are telling: the Spartan Lycurgus is paired with the Roman King and lawgiver Numa Pompilius; the Spartan general Lysander is paired with the Roman general Sulla; and the Spartan king Agesilaus

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<sup>44</sup> See *Vit. Lyc.* 18.1; cf. *Lac.* 2.9. Plutarch also suggests that he has access to archival sources that allowed him to determine the names of Agesilaus’ wife and daughters (*Vit. Ages.* 19.6). For a brief introduction to Plutarch’s sources, see Talbert (2005, xxi–xxiv, xxviii–xxix).

is paired with the Roman general and political leader Pompey. Plutarch characterizes his method in a brief introduction to the lives of Alexander and Caesar. He writes that the important deeds of those two figures are so numerous that he entreats his readers not to complain if

I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part. For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους); and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests. (*Vit. Alex.* 1.2–3)

Thus, we have neither Xenophon's encomia of Agesilaus nor the Socratic dialogues of Plato nor even the historical narrative of Xenophon. Rather, Plutarch offers biographies that supply much historical detail for political theory and often substantive evaluation of their subjects.

Although Plutarch's life of *Lycurgus* acknowledges the difficulty of determining factual details of its legendary object (*Vit. Lyc.* 1.1), it distinguishes between reforms that Lycurgus himself made to Spartan society in response to instability during the Archaic period and changes that accumulated after Lycurgus purportedly took his own life (since his fellow citizens swore an oath to follow his laws until he returned). So, for instance, Plutarch attributes to Lycurgus the establishment of the office of the Gerousia, land redistribution, and public messes; but he attributes the office of the Ephors to the later king Theopompus and the establishment of the

brutal anti-Helot practices of the *krypteia* to a post-Messenian rebellion in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> From the perspective of political institutions, Lycurgus' fundamental view was that

happiness in the life of a whole city, as in that of one individual, derives from its own merits and from its internal concord (ἀπ' ἀρετῆς ἐγγίνεσθαι καὶ ὁμονοίας) within its own borders. The aim, therefore, of all his arrangements and adjustments was to make his people free-minded, self-sufficient, and moderate in all their ways (ἐλευθέριοι καὶ αὐτάρκεις γενόμενοι καὶ σωφρονοῦντες), and to keep them so as long as possible. (*Vit. Lyc.* 31.1)

But from the perspective of the various social and educational reforms, the life of Agesilaus claims that just like natural philosophers posit the forces of conflict and discord (τὸ νεῖκος...καὶ τὴν ἔριον) to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies,

in the same way the Spartan lawgiver seems to have introduced the spirit of ambition and contention (τὸ φιλότιμον καὶ φιλόνηικον) into his constitution as an incentive to virtue, desiring that good citizens should always be somewhat at variance and in conflict with one another.<sup>46</sup> (*Vit. Ages.* 5.3)

Thus, although Plutarch likens Spartan society to a beehive in which personal identity is dissolved into group identity, over and over he exhibits both the educational causes and historical effects of such competition, perhaps especially in the lives of *Lysander* and *Agesilaus*.<sup>47</sup>

Plutarch dates Sparta's practice of "good order" from the time of Lycurgus' reforms until the kingship of Agesilaus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Like Plato and Aristotle, Plutarch offers extended

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<sup>45</sup> See *Vit. Lyc.* 5.6–7, 8.1–3, 10.1–3; 7.1–2, 28.6.

<sup>46</sup> For this theme in Xenophon, see *Lac.* 4.1–6, 10.1–3; for it in Plutarch, see *Vit. Lyc.* 16.5, 26.1; *Vit. Ages.* 2.1–2, 23.6–7; *Vit. Lys.* 21.2–4.

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch likens Spartan society to a beehive in *Vit. Lyc.* 25.3; cf. 24.1–2. The rivalry between Agesilaus and Lysander (who originally were pederastic lovers [*Vit. Ages.* 2.1]) is particularly strong (*Vit. Ages.* 6–8); see also the rivalry between Agesilaus and Xenophon (*Vit. Ages.* 9).

<sup>48</sup> Plutarch identifies Sparta's "good order" as commencing with Lycurgus and ending under Agesilaus (*Vit. Ages.* 34.1; *Vit. Lyc.* 29.6).



analysis of Sparta's collapse and defeat by Thebes at the battle of Leuctra. Proximate causes include both Lysander's re-introduction of wealth, in the form of the gold and silver that Lycurgus' constitution prohibited, and Agesilaus' repeated campaigns against Thebes, which a Lycurgan rhetra prohibited (lest a foe, through repeated exposure to Spartan tactics, develops the means to defeat them).<sup>49</sup> But in his life of Agesilaus, he compares Sparta to a human body which, although healthy, "has consistently followed too strict and severe a lifestyle: just one error tipped the scales and overturned its entire success"; Plutarch continues that

we should not be surprised by this. The Spartans' constitution was perfectly designed to promote virtue and peace and harmony. But they [Lysander and Agesilaus] then added empire and sovereignty won by force, elements which in Lycurgus' view were unnecessary for maintaining the happy life of any state; and so they were overthrown. (*Vit. Ages.* 33.2)

Plutarch is clear: according to him, "Lycurgus left nothing undone or neglected" and "in so far as human foresight could achieve this, he longed to leave Sparta immortal and immutable in the future" (*Vit. Lyc.* 27.2, 29.2). Like Xenophon (at least on my reading) and unlike Aristotle, Plutarch blames Sparta's collapse as a function of its departure from the Lycurgan reforms; the reforms themselves, were not the cause of Sparta's problems.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> On Lysander's re-introduction of wealth into Sparta, see *Vit. Lys.* 2.4, 16–17, *Vit. Lyc.* 30.1–2; on Agesilaus' violation of Lycurgus' rhetra concerning repeated wars, see *Vit. Lyc.* 13.5–6, *Vit. Ages.* 26.3–4.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see Plutarch's discussions of the *krypteia* (*Vit. Lyc.* 28.6) and Lysander's reintroduction of gold and silver (*Vit. Lyc.* 30.1, *Vit. Lys.* 16–17). Plutarch's *Inst. Lac.* include a text that claims that "as long as the Spartan State adhered to the laws of Lycurgus and remained true to its oaths, it held the first place in Greece for good government and good repute over a period of 500 years. But, little by little, as these laws and oaths were transgressed, and greed and love of wealth crept in, the elements of their strength began to dwindle also..." (42).

By means of conclusion, it is worthwhile to put Plutarch in dialogue with his theoretical predecessors in order to clarify the agreements and disagreements between my four authors. Plutarch is clearly familiar with Plato's critique of Sparta in the *Laws*, the main focus of which Plutarch articulates as the claim that Lycurgus' laws "are well designed to develop valour, but fail to foster the practice of justice"; Plutarch thinks that Plato may have arrived at that claim based on the indiscriminate killing of helots done by members of the *krypteia* or "secret police" which was tasked with the intimidation and subjugation of Sparta's helot population.<sup>51</sup> But as noted above, Plutarch denies that Lycurgus—whose character he viewed as "mild and fair" (πραότητος καὶ δικαιοσύνης)—designed such anti-helot institutions (*Vit. Lyc.* 28.6). Plutarch was also clearly familiar with Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* which as we saw above, also appeared narrowly focus on inculcating valour and obedience.<sup>52</sup> But although Plutarch fails to attribute such a criticism to Xenophon, his depiction of the Spartan educational system is far more well-rounded than that found in Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans*. According to Plutarch, the Spartan education system included instruction in sound judgment (φρονεῖν or ἀπόκρισις), the ability to express wisdom Laconically, namely in a few words; it also includes instruction in music and lyric poetry.<sup>53</sup> Plutarch also expresses surprise at the claim that Spartan's only knew how to

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<sup>51</sup> *Vit. Lyc.* 28.1–2; cf. *Leg.* 1.633bc. Plutarch also notes Plato's criticisms of the Gerousia and the Ephors (see *Vit. Lac.* 5.4 with *Leg.* 1.691e and 7.1 with *Leg.* 1.692a) and that Plato derives his own theory of government (τῆς πολιτείας ὑπόθεσιν) from Lycurgus' model (*Vit. Lyc.* 31.1).

<sup>52</sup> Plutarch cites Xenophon's *Lac.* only with respect to the birth date of Lycurgus (see *Vit. Lyc.* 1.3 with *Lac.* 10.8); but in the *Vit. Ages.* 4.2 he denies Xenophon's claim that Agesilaus gained so much power that he could do as he liked. See also *Xen. Ages.* 9.1–2, 29.1–2.

<sup>53</sup> For sound judgment, see *Lac.* 16.5, 18.3; for instruction in Laconicisms, see *Lac.* 19–20; for musical instruction, see *Lac.* 21. Xenophon fails to mention any of these instructional programs in his *Constitution of the Spartans*.

obey and he provides numerous examples of Spartan leaders who exhibit the ability of command.<sup>54</sup>

Plutarch appears quite familiar with Aristotle's critiques of Spartan in the *Politics* and scholars suspect he likely had access to the *Constitution of the Spartans* composed in Aristotle's school. But although he often quotes approvingly from Aristotle's accounts—for instance, quoting verbatim Aristotle's positive judgment of Theopompus' moderation of Spartan autocracy<sup>55</sup>—Plutarch takes Aristotle to task twice, once explicitly and once (I suspect) implicitly.

Within his discussion of Spartan family policy, Plutarch reports that

Aristotle claims wrongly that [Lycurgus] tried to discipline the women but gave up when he could not control the considerable degree of license and power attained by women because of their husband's frequent complaining... Lycurgus showed all possible concern for them too. (*Vit. Lyc.* 14.1–2)

What follows is an extended analysis of Lycurgus' educational reforms for women, which included physical education, gender egalitarianism, and modest nudity, which granted women "equal participation in both excellence and ambition."<sup>56</sup>

As we saw above, Aristotle has his own version of the critique of Spartan focus on bravery, namely that it incapacitated them to exercise leisure when they were not at war. Although

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<sup>54</sup> See *Vit. Lyc.* 30.3–6. Plutarch's example of Lysander as a harmost is complicated: although it is true that he commanded the respect of the Ionian Greeks whom he freed from Persian rule and became "master of the Greeks" (κύριός ἐστι τῆς Ἑλλάδος), Plutarch himself notes that Lysander did a very poor job at placing competent decarchies in power in the cities he freed, including Athens (see *Vit. Lys.* 13.4–5, 21.1–4). When Xenophon criticizes the conduct of Spartan harmosts (*Lac.* 14.4), he seems to have precisely an individual like Lysander in mind.

<sup>55</sup> *Vit. Lyc.* 7.1–2; cf. *Pol.* 5.11.1313a25–33.

<sup>56</sup> *Vit. Lac.* 14.4; see 14.1–4 with Cartledge (1981) and Pomeroy (2002: 159–160). Aristotle's analysis of Spartan gender norms may express more so his own views on the subject.

Plutarch does not mention Aristotle by name, he appears to have his criticism in mind in his account of “adult education.” He notes that “Spartiates’ training extended into adulthood, for no one was permitted to live as he please”; but such a life-style hardly stunted the Spartans or incapacitated their ability to make use of leisure. Rather, according to Plutarch,

abundant leisure was unquestionably among the wonderful benefits which Lycurgus had conferred upon his fellow citizen.... Except when they went on campaign, all their time was taken up by choral dances, festivals, feats, hunting expeditions, physical exercise, and conversation. (*Vit. Lyc.* 24.1, 2, 4)

Although it is hard to adjudicate between Aristotle and Plutarch on this debate, I hope this chapter makes clear that Sparta developed a social system that cultivated its citizens and a political system that mixed different forms of political power in a salutary mixture is beyond doubt. Equally clear is that by middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Spartan hegemony and empire collapsed almost entirely. Although my four political thinkers have provided nuanced accounts of that model and its collapse, already in the first century of the common era those accounts were undergoing revision and debate.

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